

*In the late 1990s the Federal Aviation Administration Office of Civil Aviation Security Intelligence published a series of Assessments and Intelligence Notes covering the threat from terrorist hijacking in general and the threat of Usama Bin Ladin/World Islamic Front engaging in a hijacking in particular. Included in these reports were An Assessment, dated September 1998 entitled, "Usama bin Ladin/World Islamic Front Threat to Civil Aviation," an Intelligence Note, dated August 1999, titled, "Usama bin Ladin/World Islamic Front Hijacking Threat," and an Assessment, dated, February 2000, titled "Prospects for Another Sustained Hijacking to Free Incarcerated Terrorists." The following information was included in these documents:*

Most international hijackings in the 1990s were attributed to individuals motivated by personal factors, such as seeking to escape social, political or economic conditions in one's homeland. These criminal acts were largely unprofessional and rarely involved violence against passengers or crew. The December 1999 terrorist hijacking of Indian Airlines flight 814 was an exception and could foretell future terrorist acts against civil aviation, which may include U.S. airliners. The incident most likely will generate an increase in threat reporting specific to civil aviation, and increase the near-term threat to U.S. civil aviation for a sustained hijacking.

While operationally difficult, a hijacking of a U.S. airliner could be viewed by bin Ladin as an option under certain circumstances. Bin Ladin could shelter his facilities from future U.S. military attack by moving American hostages/passengers from the aircraft to these sites. He could demand the release of key operatives and Egyptian spiritual leader Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman. Finally, a hijacked aircraft could be flown into a building or national landmark or blown up over a populated area; however, this is viewed as an option of last resort.

Bin Ladin directs that terrorist operations be focused on the United States, the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia. He appoints [ ] to head the attack against the United States worldwide, including attacks on U.S. soil. The methods of operation specified are hijackings, kidnappings, and bombings, to free incarcerated prisoners.

Since the arrest and incarceration of Shaykh Rahman in 1993, there have been reports of varying degrees of reliability to suggest that terrorist groups have discussed or planned the hijacking of a U.S. air carrier for the purposes of freeing Shaykh Rahman.

UBL/WIF is best situated to execute an international hijacking. The most probable location would be from Europe, the Middle East or portions of Asia where the UBL/WIF has resources and direct flight access to UBL/WIF safehavens.

A hijacking in the United States would most likely involve more American passengers, but would also be operationally more difficult and possibly more violent. This type of operation does not favor the UBL/WIF, as its infrastructure in the United States is less developed than overseas and an aircraft taken in the United States would have to be refueled to reach an overseas safehaven. The distance from cities in the northeastern United States to a safehaven in Afghanistan or Somalia would be at the maximum range of a wide-bodied aircraft. Any prolonged period on the ground either in the United States or in a foreign location would leave the hijackers vulnerable to a counterterrorist operation. The level of stress of the hijackers would

be much greater, and could translate to greater violence from the hijackers if demands and deadlines were not met by authorities.

In the 1990s, there were limited reports of questionable reliability suggesting bin Ladin associated groups or individuals had discussed a suicide hijacking.

The UBL/WIF has demonstrated the ability to undertake suicide terrorist operations. However, a scenario whereby a civilian passenger airliner is hijacked with the intent of crashing it into a monument or city in the United States appears an unlikely initial course of action. It does not offer an opportunity for dialogue to achieve the key goal of obtaining Rahman or other key captive extremists, and could result in a greater crackdown or retribution on captive leaders. A suicide hijacking is assessed as an option of last resort.

The incarceration of Rahman in the U.S. has been identified as a motivation for hijackings.

Reports indicate that hijacking training was part of a larger terrorism training program in Afghanistan. We assess that WIF extremists probably turned to the UBL/mujahedin network for their hijacking training.

The use of a safehaven could be critical for sustaining a prolonged hijacking and hostage taking. A hijacked civilian airliner could be held in a controlled environment, thus reducing the chances of a near-term rescue attempt. Passengers and crews moved to an off-airport facility may offer bin Ladin important protection from future U.S. military reprisals and rendition efforts. We assess that these conditions exist in Somalia, and could exist in Afghanistan if permitted by the Taliban. Of the two locations, bin Ladin has better resources in Afghanistan. Bin Ladin continues to support a known terrorist group in Somalia. In our judgment, no other location offers enough command and control for UBL/WIF to support a prolonged hijacking operation.

There was a series of reports that a major terrorist group affiliated with UBL/WIF was planning to hijack an aircraft from a major U.S. city in early 1999. Reporting suggested the plan was stopped before it could be carried out. Because the information could not be corroborated through checks of law enforcement and collateral intelligence, it is highly possible that this reporting was intended to mislead U.S. intelligence/law enforcement and/or for other reasons unrelated to an actual threat.

Reporting suggests that UBL/WIF may have discussed one potential safehaven as a location to support a hijacking operation, and large sums of money have reportedly been spent to upgrade facilities in that country.

Flying a plane into a populated area was a scenario described in information provided to the United States Government about an alleged plan to be conducted against a U.S. airport, most likely by suicide terrorists.

Recent reporting suggests Bin Ladin desires to conduct attacks in the U.S. but no specifics are known. Domestic aviation is one of many targets Bin Ladin may consider along with other targets possibly having greater symbolic appeal and less security.